

# Soft Authoritarianism, Ethno-Nationalism, and the Backlash Against Women's Rights in Europe

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**T**his talk<sup>1</sup> connects several of my scholarly interests over the last decades in an anthropology of the state, legal anthropology, population policies, gender, and global governance, with my recent attempts to understand the decline in liberal democratic institutions and practices, which I have addressed for the last five years in my podcast *Democracy in Question*,<sup>2</sup> currently in its ninth season. The talk provides a very broad overview of the interlinkages between far-right ethno-nationalist politics and the backlash against women's rights as part of a trend towards what I have termed "soft authoritarianism", taking examples from several European countries to illustrate the argument. Theoretically it is rather eclectic as it draws on Foucauldian ideas of biopolitics, as well as on feminist demography and postcolonial perspectives that have informed my work over the years.

I address the implications of the current wave of demographic panic in eastern and western Europe by placing it in a historical perspective to show how state interventions into reproduction have a long history that not only connects the personal to the political but also connects quantity and quality, i.e., the size of the population to eugenic questions. The differential fertility rates of ethnic and religious majorities as compared to minorities or migrants have been politicised since the 19th century, when eugenic agendas entered discourses of maintaining or improving the quality and purity of the population of one's nation or race. I argue that questions of nationalism, immigration, citizenship, and gender become inextricably entangled in the politics of

procreation once the size and composition of the body politic is linked to body politics. In the modern world, issues of reproduction and female fertility have always hinged on the relationship between state practices, capitalist economic structures, imaginations of the purity of the nation or the race, as well as geopolitics. It is important to emphasise that, even under the soft label of "family planning", population policies and programmes always are about planning someone else's family. Whether in times and places of population growth or decline, it is the demographic imagination (and not actual numbers) that has played a crucial role in shaping the politics of population control.

## Democratic politics and demographic panics

Calls for pro-natalist or anti-natalist policies have always selectively targeted the fertility of different communities differently. Fertility, mortality, and mobility are thus always layered or stratified with respect to biopolitical or necropolitical questions of who should live or die, and who should reproduce within any given territorial space. Tensions over the definition of the nation and the demos thus foster what one may call an "intimate geopolitics" in which the capacity to reproduce is marshalled for the purposes of commanding and defending territory and the nation through population numbers defined in terms of "us" and "them". In a majoritarian ethno-nationalist context, reproduction *is* politics. Like gender and sexuality, fertility and reproduction are not natural categories either. Demographic research and theorisation of population in the past and the present is thus always inherently political.

Many of the victories with respect to reproductive rights, which we once took for granted, are under massive attack in almost all parts of the world. Women are under more or less subtle forms of pressure not to have more than one child in Africa or the Middle East

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<sup>2</sup> Randeria, Shalini (Host). (2020-present). *Democracy in Question* with Shalini Randeria [Audio podcast]. Central European University. <https://www.ceu.edu/democracy-in-question>

or are being encouraged to have large families all over Europe. Everywhere ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, and the poor are being subjected to policies or programmes of fertility control, while the ethnic and religious majority is anxious about losing the demographic race. Thus, there is a selective use of pro-natalist policies in Western and Eastern Europe as well as Central Asia, just as selectively anti-natalist ones are advocated elsewhere and funded by private American foundations, e.g., in Africa.

All over Eastern and Central Europe, fertility has been turned into an issue of so-called “demographic security”, thus curtailing reproductive rights by placing the burden on women’s bodies to reproduce an ethnically “pure” nation. In Foucauldian terms, we could describe this as a case of disciplinary mechanisms that are also security mechanisms that allow a governmentality of the life processes of a population. These new discourses on demographic security remind us that the fear of falling birth rates of ethno-religious majorities and the anxiety about being outnumbered in the future by minorities or migrants are part of a political imagination in which the demographic composition and imagined continuity of the nation is considered to be at stake. Democratic politics and demographic panics are thus intertwined.

Currently, hard-won rights such as the right to abortion or contraception are just as much under attack in Poland, Turkey, Ireland, and Macedonia as in the USA. In most Western European democracies, differential rights and population policies target citizens and non-citizens differently. Migrant women, refugees, undocumented workers, as well as asylum seekers are thought of, and also treated, very differently when it comes to reproduction. Reproductive rights may be enshrined in law but may still be unobtainable in practice. This is not only due to lack of resources or service provision but, more recently, due to the refusal of doctors to provide services on grounds of conscientious objection. The practice of refusing lawful services in the area of contraception and abortion, voluntary sterilisation and prenatal testing, as well as infertility care and assisted reproduction using the argument of a doctor’s right to religious freedom is thus pitted against women’s rights to reproductive health.

In Malta and Poland, such a refusal on grounds of conscientious objection uses, in addition, the argument of state sovereignty on so-called “public morality issues” that shields these countries from an obligation to follow EU policy. In Poland, a rhetoric of “selfish and irrational non-reproduction” was used by the previous government to deny abortion while increasingly

blaming women for refusing to “save” the nation. We are witnessing a new and competing understanding of rights: rights of the unborn vs. women’s rights, rights of physicians vs. those of patients, along with a moral discourse that, in a thanatopolitical twist, holds women responsible for the death of the nation. The Vatican favours the term “procreative rights” in opposing the language of reproductive rights and advocates instead “marriage rights”, “rights of the family” and, at the individual level, a woman’s “right to motherhood”.

Ideas about the optimum size of a nation and who belongs to the nation have always been tied into anxieties fuelled by migration. For example, the white supremacist rhetoric of the “Great Replacement” in France has a long history. France experienced the most rapid population decline in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Depopulation provided a unique chance to remake the citizen body. The so-called “immigrant question” in early 20th century France was thus formulated with reference to labour power and the reproductive value of potential foreigners, who should be hard-working, assimilable, and able to produce indisputably French offspring. Demographers and politicians across the political spectrum (from conservatives to socialists) supported immigration from so-called “demographically prolific nations”, namely the Catholic countries of Italy, Spain, and Poland that were considered to embody traditional values, patriarchal authority, and maternal virtue as selfless parents. French men and women were accused of neglecting their patriotic duty to procreate due to a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure and an individualist ethos. Interestingly, very soon the appeal to “racial purity” was dropped in favour of the metaphor of judicious mixing. The “French race” was thus a dynamic construct with an ability to incorporate “compatible” Italian or Polish blood to sustain and even to regenerate it.

An interesting ambivalence is evident in these debates. Immigration was seen only as a temporary demographic solution as Italian and Polish immigrants in the next generation modelled themselves on the French and produced fewer children. So, French women were seen as both corruptors and saviours of the nation, if only they could be made to perform their patriotic duty of procreation. Depopulation in the 19th century was described as the “plague of the white race”, aggravated by the “Yellow Peril” of fast breeding Asians, who, moreover, were rising up against white nations as in the Boxer rebellion, the Russo-Japanese war, and the establishment of the Congress Party in India against British colonial rule. For France, a nation with a vast colonial Empire, a serious demographic disequilibrium

could only be corrected by immigration of assimilable fecund Italians and Poles, but not by allowing immigration from French colonies.

Let us fast-forward to Italy and Germany a hundred years later. The very idea of so-called “empty cradles” or an Italian “demographic emergency”, as propagated by the far-right Lega, is based on locating immigrants and their children in a position outside the body politic, in fact, by positing it as a threat to the nation. Such a view combines with a normative framework that privileges the principle of ancestry to grant nationality. The Italian law thus treats children born in Italy to non-Italian parents as “foreign births” and, therefore, as non-citizens.

In Germany, the former chancellor Gerhard Schröder launched his Green Card initiative in 2000 to increase the global competitiveness of the country by attracting highly qualified IT specialists from India. The Indians he was hoping to welcome to Germany stayed away; they preferred emigration to the USA and Canada because of easier naturalisation, higher salaries, an English language environment, and large Indian diaspora networks. Yet the reaction of Jürgen Rüttgers, Chancellor Schröder’s CDU opponent, to this policy idea of a German Green Card was telling: He announced that “Instead of Indians at computers we must have *our* children at computers”. But he also put forward an altruistic argument against highly skilled Indian migrants: he felt that it would be immoral and even hostile to Third World countries like India to deprive them of their own educated elite. Soon right-wing propaganda turned his statement into the memorable if ambiguous slogan “*Kinder statt Inder*” (“Children instead of Indians”), which linked migration with procreation as an exhortation to Germans to increase their fertility in an attempt to keep out the undesired foreigners who, once let into Germany, would reproduce rapidly.

However, such demographic alarm is not a predominantly German preoccupation as some of the Danish, Swedish, and Hungarian examples remind us. Danish policy makers have been so concerned about the country’s low birth rate that they have started to offer sex education classes focused on procreation rather than contraception. One travel company even advertised with a campaign called “Do it for Denmark!”, encouraging couples to take romantic holidays in order to procreate based on the statistic that Danes had 46% more sex while on holidays. A Swedish councilman tabled a proposal some years ago to offer the municipality’s 550 employees the right to a one-hour paid break each week to go home and have sex. He argued that it would give a nudge to the dwindling local population. Though

there was consensus on the need to raise birth rates in the county and the country, opinion on the council was divided on this particular solution. The New York Times reported that, while some felt that it would be difficult to enforce this measure since employees could well go for a walk during the subsidised sex break, others felt that one hour may not be enough for the desired purpose.

The Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán made this appeal to his citizens:

What’s going to happen to the Hungarians? What will become of Hungarian life in fifteen-twenty years? It’s the most personal decision of every person how many children to bear. Yet, even though it’s personal, it’s also the most important one for the sake of our community.

But what Orbán fails to mention is that the population of Hungary has also shrunk due to the out-migration of over half a million young, educated men and women since his government came to power. He announced several financial and tax incentives in an attempt to increase fertility of ethnic Hungarians, including subsidising the purchase of large 5-6 seater cars for families with four or more children. One could also see this as an indirect subsidy to German car makers, who are all producing cars in Hungary due to tax concessions and cheap skilled labour that is rapidly in short supply due to emigration. Using more drastic language, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2014 described birth control as “treason” while emphasising “the need to increase the number of our descendants”. Appealing to Turkish women to have four children, he proclaimed: “One means loneliness, two means rivalry, three means balance, and four means abundance.”

I wish to make three related arguments. Firstly, issues of minority rights and migration have been inextricably intertwined with pro-natalist population policies, or selectively anti-natalist ones directed by the state at minorities with a view to preserve the purity of the nation. State control of reproduction is thus entangled with nationalist agendas, either ethno-nationalist or cultural nationalist. Secondly, demographic calculations and designs, therefore, are never simply about quantity but always also about the *quality* of the population, i.e., about eugenic ideas of who should reproduce. For it is always those defined as the Other, who are seen to be too many and multiplying too fast. Finally, reproductive governance, whether anti- or pro-natalist, implemented through coercion, propaganda, or persuasion, through laws or financial incentives, curtails the autonomy of women to decide on whether, when, and how many children they would like to bear. Shrill political rhetoric of nationalism, as well as seemingly neutral numbers,

obscure the fact that reproductive governance was, and is, everywhere also about questions of gender, sexuality, about the desires and choices of women and their bodies.

I use the concept of reproductive governance following Morgan and Roberts (2012; see also Morgan 2019) to refer to the mechanisms through which various configurations of actors – such as the state, religious authorities, and international financial institutions, but also women's rights NGOs and social movements – use coercion, propaganda, legislative means or administrative fiat, economic incentives, moral exhortations, and ethical arguments to produce, monitor, and control reproductive practices. My argument on the consequences of demographic panic linked to pro- or anti-natalist policies illustrates that reproductive governance is undergoing a dramatic transformation as public policy conversations are coalescing around new moral regimes and rights-based actors engaged in debates about abortion, emergency contraception, sterilisation, migration, and assisted reproductive technologies.

Contrary to the international agreements to which almost all states are signatories, the new generation of pro-natalist population policies being currently advocated and enacted often uses the language, not of reproductive freedom of rights-bearing individual men and women, but that of the *demographic security of the nation*. Though varied in content, these pro-natalist policies focus on bringing national birth rates back to so-called national replacement levels. Here the objective, neutral sounding demographic calculus of population size obscures the fact that there is no natural continuity in the composition of a population, whose members vary vastly across the generations. Who is seen to belong to the nation and whose fertility is perceived as posing a threat to it are political matters, not demographic ones.

Let me give a few examples. Unabashedly eugenic in its thrust, the *Draft Demographic Security Concept of Georgia* published in 2016 states,

The demographic system is tightly interrelated to the political, social-cultural, economic, environmental and other threats and risks of the country. As one of the subsystems of the overall national security system, the demographic security represents one of the important safeguards for continuing the national genetic pool of the country, and for securing its political and social-economic development.

Aiming to revive the 'spiritual and moral fabric of the country', it calls upon the Georgian Orthodox Church to "play a substantial role in improving the demographic environment". Similarly, President Putin has recently

called upon Russian women to produce at least four to five children as their grandmothers used to do. The same pro-natalist agenda is also behind the fierce attacks on LGBTQI rights in Russia as well as in most Eastern European countries, where the state and the Orthodox Church have joined forces to condemn LGBTQI communities for non-procreation and upsetting the natural and the moral order based on two sexes, each with its own role and responsibilities.

Many of these Eastern European countries are facing a population decline accentuated by net emigration from the country. What both the Hungarian leader, Viktor Orbán, and the Bulgarian politician, who recently blamed George Soros for the declining birth rate in Bulgaria due to his support for NGOs working for women's empowerment, fail to mention is that population decline and skewed demographic age structures are also due to the large out-migration of millions of educated young people. Being in a demographic minority with little chance to affect democratic agendas and outcomes, the well qualified and talented among the younger generation of Poles, Hungarians, Bulgarians, and Croats often choose to vote with their feet instead. In the absence of the potential for voice, they choose exit, to use Albert Hirschman's (1970) famous distinction.

In this context then, what role do diasporas play in the demographic imagination of the Turkish president Erdoğan and in the political calculus of the Hungarian president Orbán? The conservative, right-leaning Hungarian diaspora in neighbouring Romania has not only been granted voting rights in Hungarian elections, but this ethnic minority also enjoys the benefits of public health care in Hungary. Immigrants living in the country for decades enjoy neither political nor social rights. Arjun Appadurai (2006) has used the apt phrase "the fear of small numbers" to refer to the growing rage and resentment against minorities, who are a constant reminder of the failure of the national project with its fantasy of ethno-religious-linguistic homogeneity. The presence of minorities, however small in number, is perceived as a sign of incompleteness of the desired ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious homogeneity of the nation.

Campaigning for the need to change the Turkish Constitution, President Erdoğan addressed the very large Turkish diaspora in Germany with reproductive recommendations. In a rare departure from the framing of the population question in national terms, he urged Turks living abroad to win the demographic race in the European countries in which they have settled. A booming Turkish population in his view would be



the most befitting answer to what he termed as the EU's "vulgarism and antagonism". He encouraged Turkish families in Germany to "Go live in better neighbourhoods. Drive the best cars. Live in the best houses. Make not three, but five children. Because you are the future of Europe. That will be the best response to the injustices against you." By shifting his reproductive gaze from the nation-state to that of the Turks as minorities in European countries, Erdoğan inverts here the logic of majoritarian nationalism. One could call this a turn to "reproduction as politics".

Right-wing populists across Europe and the US have hijacked and instrumentalised the constant anxiety of ethnic, racial, and religious majorities that they could be outnumbered by minorities or by migrants. It is a discourse of demographic panic that is very much part of the European and American political mainstream. In the US, the Republican Party, especially under Donald Trump, has contributed to a mainstreaming of an anti-immigrant agenda, pushing the Democrats to adopt it in large measure too. Parts of the Republican Party are also advocates of the Great Replacement thesis that targets Blacks and Muslims as a threat to white supremacy. In Europe, President Macron in January 2024 announced a new policy of "demographic rearmament" to encourage French couples to have larger families.

I have probably kept you guessing what all of this has to do with what I have called "soft authoritarianism" in my title, namely the slow, systematic dismantling of liberal democratic institutions using formal democratic means of large parliamentary majorities to bring about a regime change that goes unnoticed for long. "Soft" because there are no tanks out in the streets, and no military takeover. Instead, electoral majorities have been used to rewrite the constitution, curb press freedom and the functioning of civil society, hijack the courts to replace the rule of law by rule by law, adopting lawfare (Scheppel 2018) or "constitutional coup" to whittle away the liberal principles that are the foundations of institutions that safeguard democratic rights and freedoms. The same processes at work in Hungary and Turkey were equally at work in the UK under Boris Johnson, and in the USA under Trump. In France, under Macron there are continued attempts to declare postcolonial studies, critical race studies, and gender studies as American imports that are not disciplines but ideologies that corrupt French national culture and therefore should not be taught at universities. Soft authoritarian laws, court rulings, but especially institutional practices, need close ethnographic scrutiny as these are hidden in laws, administrative fiats, daily bureaucratic procedures and practices. These arbitrary

illiberal practices are here to stay in a mix of formal democracies with authoritarian features that we fail to recognise at our own peril. This phenomenon in India has been termed "captured democracy" by Yogendra Yadav (2020), who points out that democracy is here both the subject and object of capture.

Characteristic of this style of governing is the backlash against women's rights, especially reproductive rights, the definition of the population in ethno-nationalist or ethno-religious terms, a populist rhetoric of exclusion of minorities/LGBTQI communities, and many of the male leaders at the helm of affairs evincing a toxic masculinity often paired with crony capitalism. The backlash against women's reproductive rights that are enshrined in the final document of the UN Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1993 is not merely a religious or a political one. We also need to keep in mind the macro-structural conditions under which women's rights are at risk today. If Polish or Italian birth rates have fallen recently to among the lowest in Europe, it is due to economic restructuring that makes it difficult to reconcile work and family. Similar to East German women, who were accused by the West German media of going on a "procreative strike" after the German reunification in 1990, Polish and Italian women too are making fertility choices in a changed economic context, which reshapes aspirations and constrains choices. Neoliberal restructuring in both Global North and South affects women disproportionately and negatively as work becomes precarious; budget cuts and privatisation in childcare, healthcare, as well as care of the elderly make all these services more expensive and less accessible, thus increasing the burden on women.

What needs careful study is the transnational connections among these soft authoritarian leaders who are learning from one another using a common playbook and, in most European cases, have been receiving support and funding from the Russian regime. All of these soft authoritarian governments have curtailed women's rights and especially attacked reproductive freedom along with university autonomy and academic freedom.

### **The quality and quantity of the population**

Let me dwell on another important aspect of the obsession with seemingly neutral population numbers, namely their link to the normative questions of who should or should not reproduce. The question of quantity is intimately tied to questions of the quality of the population. The historian Matthew Connelly (2006; 2008) has demonstrated how eugenics and

population control were linked historically through shared intellectual origins. He has also shown how they were connected in terms of concrete historical continuities in leadership of the eugenics movement in the UK and the US as well as in India in the early 20th century. Some of the same individuals and institutions that promoted birth control at home and abroad were also raising the cry of population “degeneration” in the US and the UK by calling for birth control among the poor. Eugenics was highly influential not only in Europe and Latin America but equally in both India and China.

As Connelly (2006; 2008) has shown, qualitative and quantitative considerations were often inextricably intertwined then and have remained so till today. Those concerned about restricting immigration of certain ethnic groups on the grounds of their racial inferiority or high fertility were nevertheless in favour of a national population increase. This differential demographic treatment of migrants continues into the present. Given the seminal role of the Catholic church in shaping population policies, especially access to contraception and the availability of abortion in public health systems, there has been a transnational component to demographic agendas with respect to the religious institutions involved as well. These changes have been advocated by the Catholic church in the name of the rights of the unborn, where the foetus is cast as a rights-bearing citizen. By contrast, immigrants are defined all over the world as people who drain the state of resources, as those whose rights can be denied or withheld. Such differential rights claims produce new hierarchies of rights and of subject positions.

However, it is important to realise how difficult it is to draw a distinction between internal and external factors or distinguish clearly between national and international actors, or separate the state from the church or private powerful American foundations in the context of population policies and programmes. The lines between domestic and international and between public and private have become fuzzy since the 1920s as Malthusian and eugenic ideas of European origin came to be widely shared among elites in the Global South. Enormous sums of money and propaganda efforts were also invested by private American foundations like the Ford and Rockefeller, as well as international organisations like Population Council or International Planned Parenthood Federation, for the global diffusion of the idea of a national and planetary “over-population”, as Susanne Heim and Ulrike Schatz (1996) have demonstrated. However, as Matthew Connelly (2008) traces in his magisterial history of population control, *Fatal Misconception*, these

private actors along with the USAID, the bilateral US government aid agency, also helped to build after 1945 a large institutional apparatus for fertility control of the poor, especially in the so-called “developing world”. Thus population control has become the answer to any and all problems of poverty, economic development, ecological degradation, migration, sustainability, land and water shortages, or the status of women.

The programmes of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to distribute cheap contraceptives especially in Africa reflect this global consensus and common sense. At the London Family Planning Conference organised jointly in 2012 by the Gates Foundation and the British Department for International Development (DFID), rich countries pledged the sum of 2.6 billion USD to enable 120 million poor women and girls access to contraceptives by 2020. But this top down planning of other people’s families in the Global South can hardly be seen as a move to empower women and strengthen their rights as proclaimed by the donors. A bureaucratic apparatus for the surveillance and control of fertility and distribution of contraceptives, which is not flanked by health services, is highly problematic as decades of past experience with such programmes in India or Indonesia show. Rhetorically, the Gates Foundation programme uses the discourse of “reproductive rights”, which had been sidelined by conservatives in the Bush era. However, in practice, the London initiative once again reduces women’s rights to fertility control. Instead of investing in women’s health, education, employment, and property rights, it suggests that their status can be simply improved by the panacea of provision of contraception.

African countries have been objects of international demographic interventions since the colonial era but many, like Congo, have had a chequered demographic career. Considered as overpopulated today, it is useful to recall that, as a Belgian colony, Congo was perceived to be underpopulated. In her brilliant analysis of early 20th century interventions by the Belgian state, missionaries, and the European League for the Protection of the Black Child, Nancy Rose Hunt (1999) has detailed their attempts to raise fertility rates in Congo. Against the stiff resistance of the Congolese, these colonial actors, public and private, tried to change local, traditional practices of long periods of abstinence and breastfeeding after childbirth that helped space pregnancies. Unsure whether polygamy was a cause or a consequence of the two to three years of abstinence following childbirth, missionaries urged new converts to Christianity to “attend to their higher duties immediately after childbirth instead of acting against

nature by staying away from their husbands". Belgian mining companies along with Belgian women's groups disciplined Congolese workers' bodies, sexuality, and maternal practices of care by the introduction of short breastfeeding periods and timetables in the 1920s and 1930s.

British, German, and Belgian colonial governments were keen on rapid population growth in the colonies, which supplied raw materials and labour but had suffered demographic decline due to new diseases, harsh working conditions in plantations and mines, as well as changes in family structures and taxation systems. For instance, Sir Richard Temple, the British Governor of Bombay, wrote in 1877 to his superiors in London: "You may rest assured that I will do everything in my power to increase the population of his Majesty's subjects in India". We don't know how he planned to go about it. But it is important to realise that it is only after decolonisation in the mid-1940s that countries of the Global South came to be regarded as overpopulated. As long as the colonies were a source of labour but posed little threat of migration to Europe, they were objects of pro-natalist measures to combat underpopulation.

Against this historical and contemporary backdrop of the politicisation of procreation and the instrumentalisation of reproduction, reproductive governance must be seen in an imperial and neo-imperial framework marked by the interplay of national and transnational, public and private actors. And as I have argued, like the struggle for women's rights in the past, the successful struggle for reproductive rights and reproductive autonomy has seen significant transnational mobilisation too. It is time to organise

once again locally, nationally, and transnationally to push back against the assault on women's rights and reproductive freedom, on LGBTQI rights as well as migrants' rights worldwide.

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